

## A Lick

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In his cross cultural study of the perception of emotions, David Matsumoto used four dimension of culture that offer clues to the understanding of, and possible explanations for the diversity of responses between cultures.<sup>1</sup> These cultural characteristics are; power difference, uncertainty avoidance, individualism and masculinity. They refer to our relationship with others and with society, our ability to deal with ambiguous situations, our sense of ourselves. According to Matsumoto cultures which have a high power difference “tend to be hierarchical, emphasizing status, vertical relationships, and the importance of groups to which one belongs.” This study also demonstrates that our responses are cultural and therefore can be unlearnt as they have been learnt.

The works performed by Angela Bartram and collaborating animals address these dimensions of our experience. The dogs are all of breeds generally associated with aggression and violence – trophy dogs used to enhance a masculine culture of threat and aggression. These dogs are also neutered males. For Bartram this fact balances the power distance. Their outward appearance belies the gentle nature of these creatures who respond to Bartram's attention with the same ease with which it is given. This is not kissing as a sex act but the touching of knowledge and trust; an oral exploration of equals, at ease with each other.

Licking is a significant factor in the early development of most mammals. The expression ‘to lick into shape’ refers to the medieval belief that bear cubs are born unformed and are licked into shape by their mothers. The licking of pups by their mother is not to clean the new born of the evidence of birth but to stimulate the lungs and heart. Recent studies of early childhood development have emphasised the importance of close physical contact between creatures. To dogs, who are pack creatures as human are, the closeness of their relationships are expressed in licking and play.

The desire in these works is not to disgust but to share, dismissing species hierarchy and status in favour of the knowledge of another being, the acknowledgement of a shared experience with another and the expansion of the group to which one belongs to include other creatures of different species without the fear that culture artificially imposes.

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<sup>1</sup> Matsumoto, David. ‘Cultural Influences on the Perception of Emotion’, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*. 1989 20. pp 92 -105.